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NASIS

NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NEBRASKA FAMILIES:

STATUS REPORT, 1985

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The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

David R. Johnson, 1985 Study Director

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the ninth Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In 1985, a representative sample of 1851 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. The respondents to the 1985 survey are the fifth wave of a panel originally selected and interviewed in 1977, reinterviewed in 1979, 1981, and 1983, and supplemented by the 1984 cross-sectional survey respondents who were new migrants to the state or who had become adults (18) after 1982. These respondents will be reinterviewed every two years in order to provide information on changing quality of life. The interviews averaged approximately 35 minutes and included questions about health, finances, political interests, occupation, recreation, education, family life and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate within plus or minus 2.25 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Directors.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, the Bureau of Sociological Research, and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include interviewing a new sample of Nebraskans in 1986 as well as continuing to reinterview the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting David R. Johnson or Alan Booth, NASIS Study Directors, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1986 NASIS Prospectus.

Nebraska Families:

Status Report, 1985

During the past decades there have been dramatic changes in the processes of family formation and dissolution in the United States. The age at marriage has risen sharply with the result that much larger proportions of young people 20-24 are still single: 63% in 1982 compared to only 45% in 1970. A second process reducing the proportion of adults who are married is the high divorce rate. If current divorce rates persist, it is estimated that 50% of the marriages entered into today will eventually end in divorce. These changes have had the effect of increasing the proportion of people who live alone and decreasing the size of the average household. Additional processes, such as increasing female labor force participation and reduced childbearing, have altered the way families operate.

This report uses data from the 1985 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey to document the status of Nebraska's families. It reports on living arrangements, with a special look at children, on marital status, and on the quality and stability of Nebraska's marriages. Where possible, comparisons with national figures will be made.

Household Composition and Living Arrangements

In 1985, 76% of Nebraska adults lived in husband-wife families. Only 10% lived alone, a figure only marginally higher than the national figure of 9%. The other Nebraskans live as single parents (5%), in other family living arrangements (3%), with a same-sex roommate (2%), or in unmarried couple households (2%).

Living arrangements vary substantially by age (see Table 1). Although only 9% of all adults live alone, nearly one-third of Nebraskans over 65 live alone. On the other end of the age scale, 19% of those under 25 live in nonfamily households (with a roommate of same or opposite sex) and fully 37% still live with their parents. Only 20% of those under 25 head a household with their own spouse.

Nationally there have been substantial increases in the proportion of unmarried couple households and 4% of all couple households in the United States are composed of unmarrieds. This living arrangement is somewhat less common in Nebraska. Only 2% of all couple households in Nebraska are unmarried couple households and only 2% of all adults live in such households. This type of household is largely limited to younger people and is insignificant among those who are over 35.

Children: Living Arrangements and Childcare

The vast majority of Nebraska's children live in two-parent households. Although nationally only 75% of children under 18 live with two parents, 92% of Nebraska children have this benefit (see table 2). In some cases, one of these parents may be a step-parent due to divorce or, less commonly, widowhood, but 9 out of 10 Nebraska children have the emotional, social, and financial advantages of living with a mother and a father. This benefit occurs somewhat more often to nonmetropolitan children than to those living in metropolitan areas (92 vs. 87%).

An important aspect of children's living arrangements is their primary caretaker. Although we have no direct evidence on this, we do know mother's employment status. In Nebraska, 53% of children under 18 have a working

mother, although only 33% have a mother who works full time. Whether the mother works will be determined in part by the child's age: teenagers are more apt than preschoolers to have a working mother (see Table 3). Nevertheless, 27% of Nebraska's preschoolers have a mother who works full time and an additional 20% have a mother who works part time. This suggests that roughly half of Nebraska's preschoolers need day care of some sort. Although some of this service may be provided by family members, full time public or private daycare facilities appear to be home for 27% of our preschoolers for 50 hours a week and of another 20% for smaller time periods.

Marital Status

The United States has been described as one of the "marryingest" countries in the world. Traditionally, nearly all Americans have married and at relatively early ages. In Nebraska, 82% of all adults have married at least once and 70% are currently married. This varies by age, of course. Only 20% of those under 25 have ever married, but by age 45, well over 95% have married (see Table 4).

Because of relatively high rates of remarriage, only a small percentage (5%) of Nebraskans are currently divorced or separated. We have insufficient data on marital history to tell how many of the currently married have been previously divorced. We do know, however, that 10% of the married people between 25 and 44 are in their second marriages. Since few lose spouses to death at these ages, these 10% may be added to the 7% currently divorced to arrive at a 17% estimate of ever-divorced between ages 25-44. Previous studies show a tendency for individuals to under-report prior divorces (e.g., people report that they've never married rather than divorced or they fail to mention

prior marriages). Thus, our estimate of 15-20% of ever-married Nebraskans under 45 having experienced a divorce is probably an underestimate.

Marital Quality

All married respondents were asked to respond to a simple question about marital happiness, "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" The majority of Nebraskans (58%) report very happy marriages; only 2% say they are not too happy. There is a large middle group (40%) who are neither particularly pleased nor particularly unhappy with their marriages: they are "pretty happy."

Marital happiness is the result of complex social and personal factors that affect the happiness of the two individuals as well as the quality of their relationship. Here we report on a few of the crude background factors that affect marital happiness (see Table 4).

First, socio-economic status has a slight, but only slight, impact on marital happiness. Generally, people with more education and more income report more happy marriages.

Place in the life course also affects marital happiness. Generally younger people report the happiest marriages and reports of marital happiness are substantially lower at all ages older than 25. This is a common pattern in other studies and is usually attributed to the end of the honeymoon. There is little increase in actual dissatisfaction with age, however, and, as we'll show, older people are much less apt to consider or actually get divorced. What seems to happen is that, after age 25, people slip from being "very happy" to a less enthusiastic "pretty happy;" very few are actually unhappy.

Children also seem to be associated with reduced marital happiness. Some of this apparent effect is due to the overlap between childlessness and the honeymoon phase of marriage. Children may actually depress marital happines somewhat, however, as there is evidence that marriages experience some recovery of happiness at the later end of the family life cycle when children leave home.

National studies of marriage document that an important correlate of marital happiness is religious involvement. In Nebraska too we find that people who go to church report happier marriages than those who don't (62 vs. 53% are very happy). Going to church is but one sign of commitment to traditional values, and this commitment tends to promote marital happiness.

Marital Stability

A happy marriage is not the same thing as a stable marriage. Some people stay married for years despite great unhappiness, while others get divorced even though their marriages seem quite satisfactory. Thus, in addition to asking respondents about the happiness of their marriages, we also asked them, " A lot of people become so upset and dissatisfied with their (husband/wife) that they sometimes think about divorce. Have you felt this way about your marriage in the last two years?" Ten percent of our sample of married Nebraskans had considered divorce in the last 2 years (see Table 5).

Although considering divorce is not the same thing as marital unhappiness, the two are closely related. Our data show that, not surprisingly, 73% of those whose marriages are "not too happy" have considered divorce; 16% of those who are "pretty happy" have considered divorce and even 4% of the "very happy" have considered divorce.

Not everyone who considers divorce will get divorced. Some people will consider it for years and never do anything about it; others may consider it only briefly during a particularly stressful period and then become maritally stable once more. The factors associated with considering divorce may thus be somewhat different than those associated with actual divorce. Nevertheless, we examine the correlates of considering divorce. Generally, we find that background factors are more important determinants of considering divorce than they are of marital happiness.

Ironically, the relationship between considering divorce and socio-economic status is exactly opposite to the relationship between socio-economic status and marital happiness. Although people with more money and more education report happier marriages, they are also more apt to consider divorce. How can these findings be reconciled? The explanation appears to be that money and education make divorce easier. If the wife works, as she does in many of the families with high income, and if she has a good education, then it is economically feasible to break up the family and support two households. In less affluent households, the inability to support two households may keep people together--if not forever, then at least longer. In short, being better off generally results in a happier marriage; if it does not, then the better off couple finds it easier and quicker to divorce than does the less well off couple. This supposition is clearly supported by the evidence on considering divorce by wife's employment status: where the wife works full time, 13% of the respondents are considering divorce and this percentage steadily declines with wife's labor force commitment. Since wife's labor force participation is unrelated to marital happiness, this finding supports the argument that income, and especially wife's independent income, ease the path to divorce.

There were few rural/urban differences in marital happiness, but there is a strong difference in considering divorce: 11% of the respondents living in

urban areas are considering divorce compared to only 6% of people living on farms. This differential may reflect more traditional values in rural areas or, again, it may be a result of the greater economic interdependence between rural wives and husbands that makes divorce more difficult.

Consideration of divorce is strongly related to age. Although there is no evidence that marital happiness improves with age--and even some evidence that it worsens--consideration of divorce declines after age 45 and is virtually absent after age 65.

The results for children most closely parallel our findings on marital happiness: people with children are more apt to consider divorce than those without children in the household. Many of the childless people, of course, fall in the over 65 category and the very low consideration of divorce by the childless is thus largely an age effect. Of greater concern is the rather high probability of considering divorce among parents. Other studies demonstrate that these considerations are not likely to be immediately acted upon. That is, while parents may consider divorce more often than childless couples, they are generally rather slow to act upon this notion. Children may not keep a marriage together permanently, but most parents will consider long and hard before ending a marriage with children.

Summary

Despite all of the major changes in the American family over the past 20 years, the family in Nebraska appears to be a going concern. True, the family of today is not the same as the family of yesterday, but many things remain the same.

Most Nebraskans marry. If they get divorced, they remarry. As a result, the vast majority of adult Nebraskans live in husband-wife families—over 85% between the ages of 25 and 65. As a result, most of our children live with both a mother and a father. Their mother is more apt to be working than ever before, however, and 27% of preschoolers have a mother who works full time.

A majority of Nebraskans report that they are not just satisfied with their marriages, they are "very happy." As people get older and become parents, they show a slight tendency to become somewhat less enthusiastic about their marriages, but only a small minority (fewer than 2%) report that their marriages are actively unhappy.

Despite generally high levels of marital happiness, 10% of married Nebraskans said that they had considered divorce in the last 2 years. Many of these will not actually divorce, but some will--if not this year, then next year. Those considering divorce are likely to be young people, those with good educations, with a relatively high family income, and in couples where the wife works full time. They are also likely to be urban rather than farm.

Table 1.

Living Arrangements, Nebraska Adults, 1985

		By Age			
	Total	18-24	25-44	45-64	65+
Living Alone	10%	7%	5%	4%	31%
Married Couple Households					
Without Children	28	7	11	46	55
With Children	41	13	70	42	6
Adult Child Living With Parent	7	37	3	0	0
Single Parent Households	5	10	5	4	1
Other Family Types	4	8	3	4	6
Unmarried Couple Households	2	6	2	0	1
Roommates (same sex)	2	13	1	0	0
Total Percent	99%	101%	100%	100%	100%
Total Number	1850	289	724	471	366

Table 2.

Living Arrangements of Nebraska's Children Under 18, 1985

	Nebraska	Nation (1982)
With Two Parents	93%	75%
With Single Parent	6	22
Other	2	3
Total Percent	100%	100%
Total Number	1460	

Table 3.

Percent of Children With a Working Mother, by Child's Age, 1985, Nebraska

	Total	0 - 5	6 - 11	12-17
Mother Works Full-Time	33%	27%	31%	41%
Mother Works Part-Time	20	20	27	24
Mother Not Employed	47	53	43	35
Total Percent	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total Number	1460	486	467	507

Table 4.

Current Marital Status of Adult Nebraskans, 1985

	Total	By Age			
		18-24	25-44	45-64	65+
Currently -					
Married	70	20	82	89	60
Widowed	7	0	0	4	30
Divorced or Separated	5	2	7	5	3
Single or Never Married	18	78	11	2	7
Percent Ever Married	82	22	89	98	93
Percent Married Two or More Times	12	5	10	15	18

Table 5.

Marital Happiness, 1985

How happy is your marriage?

Very happy	58%
Pretty happy	40
Not too happy	2
Total Percent	100%
Total Number	1286

		%	N
By Attend Church -			
	Yes	62	(673)
	No	53	(613)
By Family Income -			
	Less than $20,000	54	(422)
	$20,000 - $40,000	59	(592)
	More than $40,000	58	(216)
By Presence of Children -			
	Preschool	58	(313)
	Elementary	50	(174)
	Teenagers	49	(166)
	Other/None	61	(633)
By Residence -			
	Farm	61	(245)
	Open Country, Not a Farm	55	(125)
	Town/City	57	(916)
By Age -			
	Under 25	72	(57)
	25 - 44	56	(590)
	45 - 64	56	(419)
	65+	62	(219)
By Education -			
	Less than High School	50	(152)
	High School	59	(785)
	1 - 3 Years Past High School	55	(76)
	4 Years Past High School	60	(193)
	5+ Years Past High School	57	(80)

Table 6.

Thinking About Divorce, 1985

	Thinking About Divorce?
Yes	10%
No	90
Total Percent	100%
Total Number	1286
By Marital Happiness -	
Very Happy	4
Pretty Happy	16
Not Too Happy	73
By Kids -	
Preschool	14
Elementary	17
Teenagers	14
Other/None	6
By Residence -	
Rural Farm	6
Non-Farm	12
Town	11
By Church Attendance -	
Yes	9
No	12
By Income -	
Less than $20,000	9
$20,000 - $40,000	12
More than $40,000	11
By Wife Working -	
Full-Time	13
Part-Time	10
Not Working	8
By Age -	
Under 25	10
25 - 44	15
45 - 64	10
65+	1
By Education -	
Less than High School	5
High School	11
1 - 3 Years Past High School	8
4 Years Past High School	13
5+ Years Past High School	14

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1985 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1985 NASIS. David R. Johnson. Price: $7.50.
2	How Nebraska Farmers View Their Financial Future. David R. Johnson. Price: $1.00.